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UNCLAS DHAKA 001765

SIPDIS

USTR FOR A/USTR WILLS

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH EPZ LABOR ELECTIONS LURCH FORWARD

REF: DHAKA 1731

1. (SBU) Since Parliament's passage in 2004 of legislation to extend international labor standards to Bangladesh's Export Processing Zones (EPZ), local AFL-CIO Solidary Center (SC) representative Rob Wayss has closely monitored implementation, including the elections starting in December to the interim Worker Representation and Welfare Committees (WRWC). Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) Chairman Mohammed Zakir Hussain told us on April 5 that he hoped to hold elections in all 210 registered EPZ companies by the end of May; thus far, 99 factories have held elections.

2. (SBU) Wayss recently told us that, based on its discussions with workers inside and outside the factories, SC sees five areas of concern:

A) Elections are occurring at a slow pace;

B) Workers are not receiving sufficient information from BEPZA or the employers on the law, election procedures, or on the work of the WRWC;

C) There is a pattern of employer interference in the elections. For example, employers in several cases provided copies of the new law or WRWC election procedures only to favored employees, and in one case an employer openly endorsed specific WRWC candidates through the factory PA system;

D) Retaliation against employees who express interest in running for the WRWC. Workers at a factory in Chittagong visited by Wayss had had their status changed from permanent to temporary employees, or had been demoted from quality control inspectors to cleaners; and

E) WRWC at companies where elections have been held have yet to follow the law and hold any negotiations between the WRWC and the company.

3. (SBU) Hussain told us that BEPZA has disseminated copies of the EPZ Workers Association and Industrial Relations Act 2004 to companies to distribute to workers and has conducted awareness training for WRWC members and HR officials of 50 companies. Additionally, he said, BEPZA is preparing a handbook for members of WRWC and general workers, and has no record of employer interference in the elections process. BEPZA also denies any knowledge of companies firing, suspending, or demoting workers in relation to WRWC elections.

4. (SBU) Comment: We will continue to monitor and observe where possible WRWC elections in the EPZ factories. During a scheduled meeting with BEPZA Chairman Hussain next week, we intend to press for full implementation of the new labor law. The April 11 garment factory collapse in the Savar EPZ (reftel) may heighten domestic and international scrutiny of labor conditions in Bangladesh's EPZ.

THOMAS